he Rivals

AVING THE QUEEN
y WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR.
48 pages. Doubleday. $7.95.

HE EDGE
y JOHN V. LINDSAY
36 pages. Norton. $7.95.

A moral can be found in these two edgling fictions by public figures: as-iring novelists should try to avoid be-oming mayor of New York. William F. Buckley Jr. was lucky. He lost his 965 campaign and has since had plen-y of time to tend to his twitting—in ar-icles, books of nonfiction, the *National Review* and on TV's *Firing Line*. John J. Lindsay was not so fortunate. He not only won first prize in 1965 (four years as mayor) but, as things turned out, sec-ond prize (four more years). Because of Lindsay's self-evident weariness, this battle of the books between old antag-onists is a decided mismatch.

Not that either one poses much of a threat to Norman Mailer (yet another mayoral ex-candidate). Buckley's spy thriller is set in the early '50s, when Sta-lin was in the Kremlin, Joe McCarthy was "going after the fags" in the State Department and all was right with the cold war. Blackford Oakes, Yale '51, is pipelined by the old-boy network straight into the CIA. His assignment proves crucial to the survival of the West. Someone close to England's Queen Caroline is leaking American H-bomb secrets to the reds. With nary a false step, Oakes foils this villainous plot and gets as close to the Queen as is pos-sible for a robust young conservative.

Buckley, Yale '50, is clearly half kid-ding. But the half that is not causes some problems. No discernible irony or wor-ry leaven his political message—free world ends justify the means—or his ful-some adulation of the "beautiful" Oakes, "the man-boy American, loose, bright, shining with desire and desirability." At times like these, not even Buckley's wit-tiest sesquipedalian sonorities can allay the impression that he is writing with his foot in his cheek.

Lindsay's prose, by comparison, seems set down by the numbers: "Mayor James Carr sat heavily in his big leather chair behind his littered desk in the handsome office in downtown San Marco." If Buckley has written *Frank Merriwell Joins the CIA*, Lindsay's lum-bering parable could be subtitled *Seven Years in May*. The time is the not too dis-tant future. Runaway unemployment and racial strife have brought about two years of martial law in America. Before Congress is a "Special Powers" bill that will eliminate virtually all civil liberties. "There may be," a Justice Department official concedes, "a minor constitution-al question about it . . ."

The really important question, how-ever, is can handsome California Con-gressman Mike Stuart get re-elected? Not with the speeches Lindsay gives him. "Does anyone really know any-one?" he asks his wife thoughtfully. Cli-chés wobble by like placards at a party convention: "Carr's voice rasped like rough gravel ... Pat was strong-look-ing, with a finely chiseled face and close-ly cropped, wiry hair." Yet for all its ineptitudes, Lindsay's novel does offer a disquieting peek into the political mind —or, at least, his political mind. With airports barricaded and uniformed troops prowling the streets, not one of the elected officials in *The Edge* thinks about anything but the upcoming cam-paign. This insight is depressing enough. And there may be worse on the way. Among other coming attractions, 1976 promises novels by John Ehrlichman and Spiro Agnew.

Paul Gray

A Lyre for the KGB

A HERO IN HIS TIME
by ARTHUR A. COHEN
278 pages. Random House. $8.95.

Soviet Poet Yuri Maximovich Isa-kovsky has just made love to his sec-retary, who is almost certainly the of-fice spy. In the warm indolence that follows, the lady praises one of his vers-es. She has gleaned far more from it, she says, than she ever learned from a course in Russian literature.

That encomium is immediately re-garded as a trap. An old short-story writ-er warned Yuri about such hazards years ago, after the poet had offered com-pliments for a tale. "Did I write that?" the old survivor had asked. "Perhaps you shouldn't like it, and I apologize for having written it. That is, if I wrote it in the first place. And if I didn't write that story (and I'm not saying that I didn't), you shouldn't be con-gratulating me in a public place with dozens of people whom we don't even know scurrying past listening." Yuri Maximovich's suspicion is well founded. He is dangerous to the state, first be-cause he is a citizen not yet in prison, second because he is a poet, and third because he is a Jew.

Soon after his assignation, Yuri re-ceives a frightening telephone call from the Ministry of Culture. He is to at-tend a writers' conference in New York for the purpose of delivering a secret message, contained in a poem written for him by a KGB computer, to some un-named mole in Manhattan.

Thus far—to the point at which the plot clicks and whirs—Novelist Ar-thur A. Cohen has written a delightful minor-key farce. Although he is an American (the author of two other well-received novels, *In the Days of Simon Stern* and *The Carpenter Years*), Co-hen uncannily manages to sound like a U.S.S.R. satirist writing riskily for *Sa-mizdat* circulation.

The New York section of the book is weaker; perhaps it should have been written by a Soviet. For the satire of the left-wing academic community lacks teeth, and too many plot turns seem to occur in the last third of the novel, sim-ply because something has to happen. One touch, however, indicates the book's essential virtue. Yuri Maximovich is try-ing to decide whether to defect. To stall for time, he must sell out and read the KGB's poem. He does so. But first, more artist than survivor, he takes the wretch-ed thing apart and sharpens its images. It is not clear whether he understands that as a secret message it is now worth-less. As a poem, he realizes happily, it is not bad at all.

John Skow